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ASSORTED CRISIS EVENTS™

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THERE ONCE WAS A TOWN CALLED **HEARTH.**

...ACTUALLY, THERE WERE **TWO** TOWNS CALLED HEARTH, LOCATED IN ADJACENT PARALLEL DIMENSIONS, ALMOST **EXACTLY IDENTICAL.**

*(...actually, there are **infinite** towns called Hearth, in infinite universes, all existing simultaneously, infinitely **different** and infinitely the **same**...)*

...BUT FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS STORY, ONLY TWO ARE **IMPORTANT.**

LET'S CALL THEM **HEARTH-ONE** AND **HEARTH-TWO.**

BEING THAT THEY WERE ALMOST IDENTICAL--ON **PARALLEL TRACKS**--WHAT WAS TRUE OF HEARTH-ONE WAS MOSTLY TRUE OF HEARTH-TWO.

FOR INSTANCE: HEARTH-ONE WAS FOUNDED IN 1912, BY HENRY HEARTH, A CHARISMATIC DOOR-TO-DOOR **DOOR** SALESMAN.

1914

WELCOME TO HEARTH

...AT THE TIME, HEARTH-ONE HAD A POPULATION OF **788**, AND A MAYOR NAMED **DAVE KOWALSKI.**

town of HEARTH

DAVE KOWALSKI MAYOR

...RESIDENTS OF HEARTH-ONE CALLED THEMSELVES **HEARTHLINGS.**

GREETINGS, HEARTHLINGS!

HEARTH-ONE HEARTHLINGS THOUGHT THIS WAS SOME COMBINATION OF FUNNY, EMBARRASSING, STUPID, AND CLEVER.

...LIKE MANY TOWNS ACROSS AMERICA, HEARTH-ONE WAS STUCK ON A PLANET THAT WAS **DYING FAST.**

HOTTEST YEAR ON RECORD...

...MORE THAN EXPECTED ICE LOSS...

...MASSIVE FLOODING DESTROYING COASTAL HOMES...

...RISING TENSIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST, ASIA, EUROPE, AND THE AMERICAS...

WELL, MOST OF THAT WAS TRUE ON HEARTH-TWO, TOO!

HEARTH-TWO WAS **ALSO** FOUNDED IN 1912, BY HENRY HEARTH, A CHARISMATIC DOOR-TO-DOOR **DOOR** SALESMAN.

AT THE SAME TIME, HEARTH-TWO **ALSO** HAD A POPULATION OF 788, AND A MAYOR NAMED DAVE KOWALSKI.

1914

WELCOME TO HEARTH

town of HEARTH

DAVE KOWALSKI MAYOR

NEIGHBOR"
RY HEARTH

WATCH YOUR STEP

RESIDENTS OF HEARTH-TWO ALSO CALLED THEMSELVES (YOU GUESSED IT!) HEARTHLINGS.

GREETINGS, HEARTHLINGS!

HEARTH-TWO HEARTHLINGS THOUGHT THIS WAS THE SAME COMBINATION OF FUNNY, EMBARRASSING, STUPID, AND CLEVER.

HEARTH-TWO, LIKE HEARTH-ONE, WAS STUCK ON A PLANET THAT WAS **DYING FAST**...

ATMOSPHERE HAS **IGNITED**... SCIENTISTS SAY NO HOPE FOR LIFE...

...HAWAII HAS SUNK... CALIFORNIA ONE LARGE FIRE...

...THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES HAS **KILLED HIMSELF**...

...FINAL TRANSMISSION. GOOD NIGHT AND GOOD...

...BUT HEARTH-TWO WAS STUCK ON A PLANET THAT WAS **DYING FASTER.**

ON HEARTH ONE, THE SCHOOL, POST OFFICE, GROCERY STORE, AND NON-DENOMINATIONAL CHURCH WERE ALL RIGHT NEXT TO EACH OTHER, RIGHT IN A ROW.

ON HEARTH-ONE THEY CALLED THIS STREET **MAINSTREET.**

Oh heck! A POT-HOLE!

WHEN CONFRONTED WITH A HEARTH-WIDE PROBLEM, HEARTHLINGS GOT TOGETHER IN THE SCHOOL GYMNASIUM AND LISTENED TO PROPOSED SOLUTIONS, **ONE AT A TIME.**

I MOVE THAT WE ALL CHIP IN TO FILL THE POTHOLE!

I MOVE THAT WE ALL JUST DRIVE AROUND IT!

THE WHOLE TOWN WOULD COME OUT, EVEN THE **DOGS.**

AFTER EVERYONE HAD A CHANCE TO SPEAK, THE HEARTHLINGS WOULD VOTE ON WHAT TO DO.

ALL IN FAVOR OF CHIPPING IN TO FILL THE POTHOLE?

ON HEARTH-ONE THEY CALLED THIS **DEMOCRACY.**

HEARTHLINGS WERE VERY PROUD OF IT.

ON HEARTH-TWO, EVERYTHING **BURNED.**

THE **SCHOOL** BURNED, THE **POST OFFICE** BURNED, THE GROCERY STORE BURNED, THE **CHURCH** BURNED.

RIGHT IN **A ROW.**

THE HEARTHLINGS INSIDE ALL BURNED, TOO. **TWO HUNDRED AND FORTY-SEVEN** IN ALL.

Oh, poor Wally.

WITH THE SCHOOL GYM HAVING BEEN CARRIED OFF BY A PYROCLASTIC FLOW, ALL SURVIVING HEARTHLINGS GATHERED IN A **LARGE CRATER.**

I MOVE THAT WE GET OUT OF HERE!

AFTER EVERYONE HAD A CHANCE TO SPEAK, THE HEARTHLINGS VOTED ON WHAT TO DO.

ALL IN FAVOR OF GETTING OUT OF HERE?

NOT THE DOGS, THOUGH. THE DOGS COULDN'T SURVIVE HEARTH-TWO'S **POISONOUS NEW ATMOSPHERE.** NEITHER COULD THE BIRDS, OR THE FISH, OR THE **TREES.**

THIS MADE EVERYBODY FEEL JUST **LOUSY.**

HEARTH-ONE WENT ON PRETTY MUCH AS USUAL.

NOVEMBER 1st WAS **HEARTH DAY.** ONCE A YEAR, HEARTHLINGS MARCHED UP AND DOWN MAINSTREET WHILE THROWING AROUND CUT-UP PIECES OF PAPER AND PHRASES LIKE **"CIVIC DUTY"** AND **"LOVE THY NEIGHBOR."**

THIS WAS IN FACT THE TOWN MOTTO:

Love thy Neighbor.

HEARTH D

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

WINTER WAS WARM THAT YEAR. THE ICE CARVING CONTEST WAS CANCELED, AND JESUS, MARY, AND JOSEPH GOT RAINED OUT OF THE LIVING NATIVITY SCENE, AND ON CHRISTMAS MORNING KIDS FOUGHT OVER WHO GOT TO OPEN THE FIRST GIFT.

SPRING CAME AGAIN, AND EVERYTHING WAS BLOOMING. PRAIRIE ASTER, BUTTERFLY WEED, WILD BERGAMOT, AND GOLDENROD, ALL GENTLY NODDING IN THE BREEZE.

HEARTHLINGS PICNICKED IN THE WILD FIELD JUST OUTSIDE OF TOWN.

THEN IT WAS SUMMER. SCHOOL LET OUT, MAINSTREET SHIMMERED IN THE A.M. HEAT...

DING DONG!

DING DONG!

...AND NEIGHBORS DROPPED BY WITHOUT **CALLING.**

HEARTH-TWO WENT UP LIKE SO MUCH DRYER LINT.

SO, FOLLOWING DIRECTIONS THEY GOT FROM A HOBO IN A JETPACK, THE SURVIVING HEARTHLINGS GATHERED UP WHAT WAS LEFT OF THEIR FOOD--

--(dented cans of olives, creamed possum meat, whole canned cheeseburgers)--

--AND ALL REMOTELY DRINKABLE LIQUIDS--

--(including bottles of their own urine)...

...AND HEADED FOR **HEARTH-ONE.**

THEY WALKED THROUGH THE RUINS OF ONCE-GREAT CITIES, AND OVER MASS GRAVES THE LENGTH OF FOOTBALL FIELDS. THEY WALKED BENEATH A SKY FULL OF BURNING CLOUDS THAT RAINED FIRE OFF AND ON.

...BACK TO **HEARTH,** TO THE STILL-STANDING BASEMENT OF THE LONG-ABANDONED **DOOR FACTORY...**

...BACK TO A CERTAIN DOOR, IN A CERTAIN ROOM...

WATCH YOUR STEP

THEY LOST HEARTHLINGS BY THE **HUNDREDS,** INCLUDING **MAYOR DAVE.**

THEY KEPT WALKING UNTIL THEY CAME BACK TO WHERE THEY **STARTED--**

--(this wasn't a mistake, the directions were very clear-- if they wanted to get out, they had to take the long way)...

...BACK, THEY HOPED, **HOME...**

HEARTH-ONE HANK JENKINS COULDN'T BELIEVE HIS EYES.

I CAN'T BELIEVE MY EYES!

IT'S SOME KIND OF... HEARTH-TWO!

THEY SHOWED UP ON DOORSTEPS ALL OVER HEARTH-ONE, STINKING AND SKELETAL, COAL BLACK FROM ASH.

MAYOR DAVE IMMEDIATELY REQUESTED AID FROM STATE AND FEDERAL GOVERNMENTS, AND SCHEDULED A VOTE TO EXTEND FULL RIGHTS AND CITIZENSHIP TO THE HEARTH-TWO HEARTHLINGS FOR THE FOLLOWING MONTH.

PUT YOURSELVES IN THEIR SHOES! WHICH ARE ALSO *OUR* SHOES!

A STRAW POLL PUT SUPPORT AT OVER 90%.

ONLY **WILLIE FUCHS**, THE TOWN CRANK, SPOKE IN OPPOSITION.

MY QUESTION IS, WHERE DOES IT *END?*

FIRST IT'S HEARTH-TWO, NEXT THING YOU KNOW IT'S HEARTH-THREE AND FOUR, HEARTH-52, HEARTH-616...

WHERE DOES IT END?!

NO ONE EVER TOOK HIM SERIOUSLY, ANYWAY.

SO THE HEARTHLINGS OF HEARTH-ONE MADE UP GUEST ROOMS AND COOKED THEIR FAVORITE FOODS. THEY SHARED CLOTHES AND CRIED TOGETHER FOR THE HEARTHLINGS WHO HADN'T MADE IT.

THAT FIRST NIGHT, SITTING AT HIS CROWDED TABLE, HEARTH-ONE HANK JENKINS THOUGHT ABOUT THE TOWN MOTTO AND SMILED.

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

HE'D ALWAYS FOUND IT KIND OF **CORNY**, BUT IT FELT GOOD TO LIVE UP TO IT ALL THE SAME.

HEARTH-TWO HANK JENKINS HAD BEEN THINKING ABOUT THE TOWN MOTTO SINCE HE SHOWED UP ON HIS OWN DOORSTEP.

SO THEY GET TO BE "HEARTH-ONE"?

...WELL, I GUESS THAT'S ONLY FAIR.

WHERE ELSE WAS HE SUPPOSED TO GO?

IT WAS ALL JUST LIKE HE REMEMBERED IT-- THE SCHOOL, THE POST OFFICE, THE GROCERY STORE, THE CHURCH. BRIGHT WHITE CLOUDS, AND FLOWERS IN THE FIELDS.

WAITING OUTSIDE THE GYMNASIUM FOR HEARTH-ONE'S DECISION, HANK BENT DOWN AND KISSED MAINSTREET.

Neighbors. We are, **all** of us, ***neighbors.***

IT WAS SWEET ON HIS LIPS.

AS HE WATCHED HIS BEAUTIFUL, STARVING CHILDREN SCARF DOWN DOREEN'S FAMOUS CHICKEN PARM, HEARTH-TWO HANK FELT ALMOST **GIDDY.**

BECAUSE THEY'D BEEN THROUGH SO MUCH. AND **LOST** SO MUCH. BUT IT WASN'T LIKE HOW THEY SAID ON TV, NEIGHBOR TURNING AGAINST NEIGHBOR. IT WAS JUST THE **OPPOSITE.**

IN A **CRISIS,** A **REAL** CRISIS, PEOPLE **TAKE CARE** OF EACH OTHER.

NEVER HAD IT BEEN SO CLEAR HOW MUCH THEY ALL NEEDED ONE ANOTHER. AND **"NEEDING AND BEING NEEDED,"** HANK NOW SAW, WAS JUST ANOTHER WAY OF SAYING **"LOVING."**

SITTING THERE, THE OLD TOWN MOTTO FELT **NEWLY PROFOUND.**

A FEW WEEKS LATER, HEARTH-ONE PETE WAS TRYING TO LOVE HIS NEIGHBOR, HEARTH-ONE HARRY, BUT HE WAS REALLY STRUGGLING.

BECAUSE STAYING WITH HEARTH-ONE HARRY WERE HEARTH-TWO HARRY AND HEARTH-TWO TINA, SEEMINGLY NOW AN ITEM.

YOU'VE BEEN OUT HERE FOREVER. WHY DON'T YOU COME INSIDE, PETE?

IN A MINUTE, TINA.

HEARTH-ONE TINA STILL LIVED WITH HIM, HEARTH-ONE PETE, AS SHE HAD SINCE THEY WERE MARRIED EIGHT YEARS EARLIER.

PETE'S HEARTH-TWO COUNTERPART HAVING APPARENTLY DIED HORRIBLY.

NOW EVERY TIME PETE STEPPED OUT OF HIS HOUSE HE SAW HARRY AND HIS NOT-WIFE EMBRACING, TINA'S HEAD RESTING ON HARRY'S SHOULDER, HARRY GENTLY STROKING HER BACK, TINA OCCASIONALLY SHUDDERING WITH PLEASURE.

...SHUDDERING IN A WAY THAT HIS TINA HAD NEVER SHUDDERED WITH HIM, PETE HAD TO ADMIT. WHICH IT WAS LIKE THEY WERE RUBBING IN HIS FACE.

"Love thy neighbor."

=Humph!=

ALL OVER HEARTH-ONE, HEARTHLINGS WERE STRUGGLING TO ADJUST. SERVICES COULDN'T KEEP UP WITH DEMAND-- GROCERY STORE SHELVES WERE OFTEN EMPTY, AND THE PRICE OF EVERYTHING KEPT GOING UP.

TWENTY-FIVE DOLLARS FOR EGGS?!

LITTLE INCONVENIENCES LIKE THIS PILED UP ALL OVER TOWN. IT BEGAN TO FEEL TO MANY HEARTH-ONE HEARTHLINGS THAT THEY HAD THE PROBLEMS OF A SMALL TOWN AND BIG CITY--

--THE WORST OF BOTH WORLDS.

ONE HOUSE OVER FROM PETE AND A WORLD AWAY, HEARTH-TWO TINA WAS TRYING NOT TO CRY, AND **FAILING.**

AFTER HER PETE HAD BEEN BOILED ALIVE IN HIS OWN BODILY FLUIDS, TINA WAS SO DEVASTATED SHE'D WANTED TO THROW HERSELF INTO A FIERY PIT...

...BUT HARRY'D **PROMISED** PETE THAT HE'D TAKE CARE OF HER.

ACTUALLY, THEY'D TAKEN CARE OF EACH OTHER. WHEN TINA WAS SO TIRED SHE COULDN'T WALK, HARRY CARRIED HER ON HIS BACK. AND WHEN HARRY GOT CAUGHT IN A FIRESTORM, TINA CLEANED HIS WOUNDS AND CHANGED HIS BANDAGES EVERY DAY.

HAVING BOTH LOST EVERYTHING, THEY **FOUND** EACH OTHER.

BUT NOW, EVERY TIME SHE SAW PETE, EVEN THOUGH IT WASN'T **HER** PETE, TINA WANTED TO THROW HERSELF INTO THAT PIT AGAIN.

HARRY WOULD HAVE TO HOLD HER AS SHE PRESSED HER FACE AGAINST HIS CHEST, SHUDDERING WITH SOBS AS HIS SHIRT GREW GRADUALLY WETTER.

SOMETHING LIKE THIS WAS HAPPENING TO ALL THE HEARTH-TWO HEARTHLINGS.

WEDNESDAY SHOPPING, RIGHT? WANT COMPANY?

NO, THAT'S ALRIGHT. YOU JUST REST.

MOST HAD EXPECTED TO STEP RIGHT BACK INTO THEIR LIVES. BUT THEY WERE STARTING TO SEE THAT THEIR OLD LIVES WERE ALREADY **SPOKEN** FOR.

THERE JUST WASN'T ANY ROOM.

IN THE FALL, SCHOOL STARTED. CLASS SIZES WERE **150%** OF NORMAL, AND TEACHERS WERE **OVERWHELMED.**

DURING FIRST RECESS, JAN KURKOWSKI DESCRIBED THE DEATH OF JOEY LEDERMAN IN GRISLY DETAIL TO AN AUDIENCE OF RAPT THIRD GRADERS.

...RAN TO THE CREEK TRYING TO PUT HIMSELF OUT, BUT THE CREEK WAS ON FIRE TOO... I DIDN'T KNOW WATER COULD BURN, BUT IT **CAN...**

MANY OF THE KIDS WHO'D HEARD HAD TROUBLE SLEEPING. PARENTS WERE UP ALL NIGHT.

ONE WEDNESDAY, HEARTH-ONE JAKE JENKINS CAME HOME WITH A **BROKEN NOSE,** REFUSING TO SAY WHAT HAPPENED...

I'M **FINE!** LEAVE ME ALONE!

...AND HEARTH-ONE JESSIE STARTED SMELLING OF **CHEAP MENTHOLS** AND **STALE BEER.**

ALL OF THIS MADE HEARTH-ONE PARENTS FEEL HELPLESS AND ANGRY AND SCARED.

THEY LOVED THEIR KIDS SO MUCH.

HEARTH-TWO STUDENTS WERE ALSO OVERWHELMED.

YOU'VE ALL *LOST* A *YEAR,* SO WE'LL HAVE TO HOLD EVERYONE BACK.

HALF THE HEARTH-TWO KIDS WERE **DEAD,** AND THE REST SUFFERED FROM CRIPPLING POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS.

THEY'D ALL LOST PARENTS, BROTHERS, SISTERS, FRIENDS... AND HAD THE **SCARS** TO PROVE IT.

JAN KURKOWSKI HADN'T SLEPT THROUGH THE NIGHT EVEN ONCE SINCE SHE'D ARRIVED IN HEARTH-ONE.

MIKEY TROTTER HAD SOME KIND OF VIOLENT FIT IN THE HALLWAY ONE DAY, BREAKING JAKE JENKINS' NOSE IN THE PROCESS. WHEN HE CALMED DOWN HE APOLOGIZED, OBVIOUSLY TORN UP BUT NOT REMEMBERING ANY OF IT.

I'M **SORRY!** I'M SO **SORRY!**

IT'S ***OKAY,*** MIKEY. IT'S OKAY.

SOME KIDS PICKED UP BAD HABITS TO HELP DEAL WITH THE STRESS OF CHANGING UNIVERSES.

ALL OF THIS MADE HEARTH-TWO PARENTS FEEL HELPLESS AND ANGRY AND SCARED.

THEY LOVED THEIR KIDS **SO** MUCH.

RUMORS STARTED GOING AROUND THAT HEARTH-TWO HEARTHLINGS WERE **STEALING** HEARTH-ONE JOBS.

HE'S OFFERING TO DO ***YOUR*** JOB FOR 50% LESS! ***THINK*** ABOUT IT! SAME EXPERIENCE, SAME SKILLS!

THOSE **UNGRATEFUL** TWOS!

HEARTHLINGS STOPPED **LAUGHING** AT WILLIE FUCHS AND STARTED **LISTENING.**

TRYING TO CALM RISING TENSIONS, MAYOR DAVE AGAIN PRESSED FEDERAL AND STATE GOVERNMENTS FOR GUIDANCE AND EMERGENCY FUNDS.

THEY BOTH CAME BACK WITH THE SAME ANSWER:

YOU'RE ON YOUR OWN!

I'M SORRY, GUYS... you're on your own.

THIS INDIFFERENCE SEEMED TO **TRICKLE DOWN** TO THE HEARTH-ONE HEARTHLINGS. IT GAVE THEM A KIND OF **PERMISSION.**

ONE BY ONE THEY ASKED THEIR HEARTH-TWO COUNTERPARTS TO LEAVE.

DENNIS' CAMPING SUPPLIES

MAYOR DAVE, FEELING **GUILTY,** USED HIS OWN MONEY TO BUY OUT THE CAMPING SUPPLY STORE OF TENTS AND SLEEPING BAGS AND HANDED THEM OUT, WISHING HE COULD DO MORE.

I WISH I COULD DO MORE.

THE RUMOR AMONG HEARTH-TWO HEARTHLINGS WAS THAT THEY WERE GOING TO BE FORCED TO LEAVE.

THEY WOULDN'T DO THAT! THESE ARE *OUR* HOMES, TOO! WE'RE ALL HEARTHLINGS!

THEY'VE ALREADY DELAYED THE VOTE ON PROPOSITION 2 *TWICE!* AND HAVE YOU HEARD WHAT FUCHS IS--

WE HAVE TO TRUST THEM! WE HAVE TO TRUST *OURSELVES!*

HANK'S RIGHT! WE'RE ALL *NEIGHBORS,* AFTER ALL!

POOR HEARTH-TWO HANK. NEVER SAW IT COMING.

YOU CAN'T DO THIS! I'M *YOU!*

A MAKESHIFT CAMP BEGAN TO FORM ON THE UNINCORPORATED LOT JUST OUTSIDE TOWN.

THEY CALLED THE CAMP **HEARTH-TWO.**

ON HEARTH-ONE...

HEARTH DAY WAS CANCELED THAT YEAR. NO ONE FELT MUCH LIKE CELEBRATING.

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

GOOD FENCES MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS

YOU COULD STILL SEE THE USUAL LOVE THY NEIGHBOR YARD SIGNS HERE AND THERE, BUT **NEW** SIGNS STARTED JOINING THEM.

THAT WINTER, TEMPERATURES HIT RECORD LOWS. IT WAS SO COLD YOU COULD HEAR A PIN DROP FOR HALF A MILE.

DUE TO PUBLIC PRESSURE, THE VOTE ON PROPOSITION 2-- **AUTOMATIC CITIZENSHIP** FOR ALL HEARTH-TWO HEARTHLINGS-- WAS DELAYED, AND DELAYED AGAIN.

IN THE SPRING, NEW RUMORS CAME IN WITH THE FLOWERS-- THAT THE TWOS WERE INFILTRATORS, SENT BY THE TWISTED SURVIVORS OF THEIR ORIGINAL UNIVERSE TO PREPARE THE WAY FOR A FULL-ON INVASION...

...OR THAT THEY CAME FROM A UNIVERSE WHERE **GOOD** WAS **EVIL** AND **EVIL** WAS **GOOD**. THAT THEY WERE **STEALING, KILLING,** AND **EATING** HEARTH-ONE'S PETS...

WILLY FUCHS DECLARED HIS CANDIDACY FOR MAYOR TO A ROARING CROWD ON MAIN. HE PROMISED **"COMPREHENSIVE MULTI-VERSAL BORDER INTEGRITY,"** THOUGH EVEN HE WASN'T SURE WHAT HE MEANT.

FUCKS FOR MAYOR

THIS GUY FUCHS

NO TWOS

WE'RE NUMBER ONE

VOTE NO ON PROP TWO

TWOS NOT WELCOME

KEEP HEARTH ONE HEARTH ONE

SUMMER FELT DIFFERENT THAT YEAR-- THE HEAT WAS ALMOST CRUEL.

PRICES ROSE, PROPERTY VALUES AND QUALITY OF LIFE DECLINED, AND HEARTHLINGS GOT GRADUALLY ANGRIER AND MORE AFRAID.

MEANWHILE ON HEARTH-TWO...

THERE WERE NO HEARTH DAY CELEBRATIONS, EITHER. TO MOST HEARTH-TWO HEARTHLINGS, THE TOWN MOTTO SEEMED LIKE A **CRUEL JOKE.**

HEARTH-TWO KIDS, BARRED FROM SCHOOL, READ WHATEVER THEY COULD FIND TO PASS THE TIME-- TAKEOUT MENUS, JUNK MAIL, HALF OF A HIGHSCHOOL **CHEMISTRY** TEXTBOOK.

ON COLD WINTER NIGHTS, HEARTHLINGS SHIVERED IN THEIR THIN PLASTIC TENTS. ONE SUBZERO MORNING, HANK FOUND JIM AND STEPHANIE ANDREWS FROZEN IN EACH OTHER'S ARMS. HE HAD TO USE A CROWBAR TO PRY THEM APART.

SOME OF THE HEARTHLINGS TRIED TO ORGANIZE PROTESTS DEMANDING FULL CITIZENSHIP, BUT FOR MOST IT WAS ALL THEY COULD DO TO STAY **ALIVE.**

THEN THE WEATHER WARMED UP AND HEARTH-TWO BECAME ONE BIG **MUD PIT.** THE FEW STRUCTURES THEY'D PUT UP COLLAPSED AND IT WAS HARD TO WALK OR EVEN STAND.

WILLIE FUCHS AND HIS SUPPORTERS BEGAN BUILDING A WALL TO SEPARATE THE TWO HEARTHS.

BY SUMMER, IT WAS REALLY STARTING TO **SINK IN.** THERE WAS NO BUILDING ANYTHING ON HEARTH-TWO. UNTIL THEY WERE FULL CITIZENS, THEY HAD NO FUTURE.

WITHOUT A FUTURE, LIFE BEGAN TO LOSE ITS MEANING. HEARTHLINGS GOT GRADUALLY ANGRIER AND MORE AFRAID.

FINALLY, MAYOR DAVE SET THE DATE OF THE PROPOSITION Z VOTE FOR NOVEMBER 1st-- THE SAME DAY AS BOTH HEARTH DAY AND THE MAYORAL ELECTION.

HEARTHLINGS COULD FEEL THAT IT WAS ALL BUILDING TO SOME-THING, BUT THEY WEREN'T SURE WHAT.

WHAT'S HAPPENING, DADDY?!

STEP AWAY FROM THE GIRL!

ABOUT THREE WEEKS BEFORE HEARTH DAY, THEY ARRESTED GUY MAYHEW FOR MURDER.

AFTER THEY GOT THE FULL STORY, THEY ADDED IDENTITY THEFT.

IT TURNED OUT HEARTH-TWO GUY HAD KILLED HIS HEARTH-ONE COUNTERPART AND STOLEN HIS LIFE.

FOR MONTHS HE'D BEEN LIVING IN ANOTHER GUY'S HOUSE, MAKING LOVE TO ANOTHER GUY'S WIFE, AND TUCKING ANOTHER GUY'S KIDS INTO BED-- WITH NO ONE THE WISER.

LET ME GO! THAT'S MY FAMILY, LET ME GO...!

IT WAS ONLY THE SMELL OF THE OTHER GUY'S ROTTING CORPSE, BURIED BENEATH THE BACKYARD SHED, THAT GAVE HIM AWAY.

I didn't know, I didn't know. I THOUGHT WE WERE HAPPY...

THERE, THERE, HONEY. IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT. IT'S THEIR FAULT.

THE FEW REMAINING HEARTH-TWO HEARTHLINGS STILL LIVING IN HEARTH-ONE WERE ASKED TO LEAVE.

MEANWHILE ON HEARTH-TWO...

EVERYBODY COULD SEE GUY HADN'T BEEN RIGHT SINCE HE'D LOST HIS WIFE AND TWO KIDS ON THE JOURNEY TO HEARTH-ONE.

IT WASN'T UNUSUAL-- MANY HEARTHLINGS HAD LOST LOVED ONES, EVEN WHOLE FAMILIES. WHAT WAS UNUSUAL WAS THAT GUY REFUSED TO **ACKNOWLEDGE** HIS LOSS.

GREETINGS, HEARTHLINGS!

HE SPOKE ABOUT HIS WIFE AND KIDS AS IF THEY WERE STILL ALIVE, ALWAYS JUST IN THE OTHER ROOM, OR ON AN ERRAND.

MOST DAYS, GUY WAS DOWNRIGHT **CHEERY.**

I'M SORRY. I'M SO SORRY.

WHEN HE DISAPPEARED FROM THE CAMP, FRIENDS REPORTED HIM MISSING, BUT SHERIFF WATTLY HAD OTHER PRIORITIES.

MY JOB IS TO PROTECT HEARTHLINGS FROM ***TWOs,*** NOT TWOs FROM ***THEM-SELVES.***

NO ONE THOUGHT HE'D **HURT** ANYONE. THEY WERE WORRIED HE'D HURT **HIMSELF.**

HE'D ALWAYS BEEN SUCH A **GENTLE GUY.**

FROM THAT POINT ON, HEARTH-TWO HEARTHLINGS WERE REQUIRED TO WEAR SPECIAL ***IDENTIFYING ARMBANDS.***

FOR THE ***SAFETY*** OF ***ALL*** HEARTHLINGS!

2

A FEW DAYS AFTER GUY, THEY FOUND STEVE LIPINSKI IN A PARKED CAR WITH HIS **13-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER'S** DOPPELGANGER AND HIS PANTS AROUND HIS ANKLES.

I, uh--

THEY LET HIM GO WITH JUST A WARNING, BUT HIS WIFE GOT A RESTRAINING ORDER AND HE'S BEEN LIVING AT THE HEARTH INN EVER SINCE.

ALL OVER HEARTH-ONE, HEARTHLINGS STRUGGLED TO ADJUST TO THEIR NEW REALITY.

I DON'T WANT YOU TALKING TO HARRY ANYMORE! I'M ***SERIOUS!***

YOU'RE BEING ***RIDICULOUS,*** PETE! THERE'S NOTHING BETWEEN US! THAT'S NOT ***ME!***

BUT YOU'RE JUST ***LIKE*** HER! WHICH MEANS THERE ***COULD*** BE! AND IN A SENSE, THERE ***ALREADY IS!***

EVERY DAY THEY WERE CONFRONTED WITH STRANGE NEW SITUATIONS AND PROBLEMS THEY DIDN'T COMPLETELY UNDERSTAND.

MY GOD, LOOK AT THIS GROCERY BILL! I DON'T GET IT. THE KIDS ARE EATING MORE THAN EVER BUT I SWEAR THEY'RE ***LOSING WEIGHT!***

WHERE DOES IT ALL ***GO?***

AND WHERE THE ***FUCK*** IS ***FLUFFY?!***

THEY MIGHT HAVE HANDLED IT BETTER, BUT THE PEOPLE THEY HAD TRUSTED TO TELL THEM THE TRUTH, TO GUIDE THEM AND HELP THEM, WERE NOWHERE TO BE FOUND.

THE HEARTH-ONE HEARTHLINGS FELT **ABANDONED.**

LITTLE ORPHAN ANNIE LIPINSKI HAD BEEN ON HER OWN A **WHILE.** BY NOW SHE WAS BASICALLY A **GROWN-UP.** SHE SAID GROWN-UP THINGS AND SAW GROWN-UP THINGS AND **DID** GROWN-UP THINGS.

MOST NIGHTS SHE **DRESSED-UP** LIKE A GROWN-UP, AND **LEANED-IN** LIKE A GROWN-UP, AND SAID PRACTICALLY THE MOST GROWN-UP THING ONE GROWN-UP CAN SAY TO ANOTHER GROWN-UP--

HEY, DADDY.

ON HEARTH-ONE, HEARTH-TWO 13-YEAR-OLD GIRLS COULD BE GROWN-UPS.

SO THEY TOOK GROWN-UP ANNIE TO THE GROWN-UP JAIL AND SET BAIL AT THE VERY GROWN-UP SUM OF $500, WHICH FOR HER MAY AS WELL HAVE BEEN A MILLION.

ALL OVER HEARTH-TWO, HEARTHLINGS STRUGGLED TO ADJUST TO THEIR NEW REALITY.

I CAN'T WAIT ANYMORE. I ***DON'T CARE*** IF IT'S OFFICIAL.

MARRY ME, TINA.

EVERY DAY THEY WERE CONFRONTED WITH STRANGE NEW SITUATIONS AND PROBLEMS THEY DIDN'T COMPLETELY UNDERSTAND.

WHAT LITTLE SOLACE THEY FOUND--

BY THE AUTHORITY VESTED IN ME BY ABSOLUTELY NOTHING WHATSOEVER, I NOW PRONOUNCE YOU MAN AND WIFE.

--THEY FOUND IN ***EACH OTHER.***

MOM MADE CHICKEN PARM TONIGHT.

YOU EAT, TOO. YOU'RE LOOKING SKINNY.

WE'RE OKAY.

FLUFFY! DAD'S BEEN LOOKING FOR YOU!

I guess you like it better here, huh?

WE BETTER GET HOME. OUR PARENTS WILL ***FLIP*** IF THEY FIND OUT WE WERE HERE.

MOSTLY, THOUGH...

...THE HEARTH-TWO HEARTHLINGS FELT **ABANDONED.**

ON THE DAY OF THE VOTE, HEARTH-ONE VIBRATED LIKE A PLUCKED STRING.

IT'S THE VIBRATIONS!

IN FRONT OF THE HEARTH STATUE, THE CANDIDATES SANG THEIR SONGS AND MADE THEIR CLOSING ARGUMENTS...

THE TWOs EXIST AT A DIFFERENT VIBRATIONAL FREQUENCY! THEY ARE *INCOMPATIBLE* WITH OUR REALITY! THEY DON'T *FIT!*

BAD VIBRATIONS, MY FELLOW HEARTHLINGS-- THIS IS SIMPLY *SCIENCE!*

MY FELLOW HEARTHLINGS, AS YOU GO TO VOTE TODAY, I REMIND YOU OF THE TOWN MOTTO-- ***LOVE THY NEIGHBOR.***

HEARTH-TWO IS OUR *COSMIC* NEIGHBOR! VOTE FOR ME AND VOTE YES ON PROP 2-- IT'S THE HEARTHY THING TO DO!

THEN HEARTH-ONE MADE ITS CHOICE. THE POLLS CLOSED AT 6pm, AND THE RESULTS WERE IN BY 7.

WELL?

I ask again-- *where does it end?!*

HEARTH-TWO DIDN'T GET A VOTE. SO THEY STOOD AND WATCHED AND WAITED.

My fellow Hearthlings, as you vote today, I want you to remember and honor the town motto-- *love thy neighbor.*

WHAT'S HE *SAYING?*

HANK WASN'T SURE. CONTRARY TO FIRST APPEARANCES, EVERYTHING WAS DIFFERENT ON HEARTH-ONE.

EVEN THE TOWN MOTTO DIDN'T SOUND RIGHT.

Hearth-Two's not your neighbor! They're not even from the same ***universe!*** You've got more in common with a ***slime mold!***

Real Hearthlings will vote for Willie and vote ***No*** on Proposition Z!

THE WORDS WERE THE SAME, BUT THEY SEEMED TO MEAN SOMETHING ELSE HERE.

HANK STILL HELD ON TO THE HOPE THAT THINGS WOULD WORK OUT.

WELL?

IT WAS PRETTY MUCH ALL HE HAD LEFT TO HOLD ON TO.

THE RESULTS WERE IN-- THE NO/FUCHS TICKET WON IN A LANDSLIDE.

EVEN WILLIE SEEMED SURPRISED.

Wow.

HEARTH-ONE HANK JENKINS DIDN'T FEEL GREAT ABOUT IT, BUT HE WAS PRETTY SURE THE RIGHT SIDE HAD WON.

I JUST DON'T THINK WE CAN TRUST THEM TO MAKE GOOD CHOICES.

PETE WAS CERTAIN OF IT.

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION! WINNERS AND LOSERS! HEARTH WON!

IT WAS THAT CERTAINTY, MAYBE, THAT LED TO THE FIGHT BETWEEN HIM AND HEARTH-TWO HARRY.

STAY AWAY FROM MY WIFE, YOU DIRTY TWO!

AND THAT FIGHT THREW OFF SPARKS THAT STARTED OTHER FIGHTS...

...LITTLE FIGHTS BREAKING OUT ALL OVER TOWN...

IN HEARTH-TWO HEARTHLINGS, THE SPARKS FOUND FLAMMABLE INTERNAL MATERIAL.

SOME WERE SURPRISED BY THE RESULTS, SOME **WEREN'T.**

BUT **EVERYONE** WAS **ANGRY** ABOUT THEM.

AFTER ALL THEY'D LOST, NOW THEY'D LOST SOMETHING THEY DIDN'T EVEN KNOW IT WAS **POSSIBLE** TO LOSE-- THEIR **PERSONHOOD.**

BY SIMPLE MAJORITY, THEIR **WHOLE EXISTENCE** HAD BEEN DENIED. WHO WOULDN'T BE ANGRY?

THE VOTE WAS A **SPARK.** THEIR HEARTS WERE TINDER.

LET'S BRING THE **SMILING BASTARD DOWN!**

HEARTH-TWO WENT UP LIKE SO MUCH DRYER LINT.

HENRY HEARTH CAME DOWN HARD.

WELCOME TO HEARTH

"LOVE THY NEIGH-
-HENRY HE

CRASH

AND THE FIRE ROSE.

HEY, OUR STATUE!

THE STATUE WAS A SYMBOL. IT NOW MEANT DIFFERENT THINGS ON DIFFERENT HEARTHS.

BUT ON HEARTH-ONE, AN ATTACK AGAINST IT WAS AN ATTACK AGAINST EVERY HEARTH-ONE HEARTHLING. THEIR VERY EXISTENCE.

TWOs WILL NOT REPLACE US!

AND SO THE HEARTH-ONE HEARTHLINGS WERE ALL FILLED WITH FLAMMABLE INTERNAL MATERIALS AND ALL WENT UP LIKE SO MUCH DRYER LINT.

THE FLAME JUMPED FROM TENT TO TENT, SWALLOWING CHEAP WOOD, DIRTY RAGS, FAMILY PHOTOS AND COLORING BOOKS AS IT WENT.

THERE WERE NO FIRE EXTINGUISHERS ON HEARTH-TWO. THERE WASN'T EVEN RUNNING WATER.

SO HEARTH-TWO BURNED A SECOND TIME.

FROM THE CHEMISTRY HALF-TEXTBOOK, JESSIE JENKINS HAD MEMORIZED THE DEFINITION OF FIRE. IT WAS THIS--

"--matter rapidly and violently combines with oxygen to become heat and light and water and ash."

"General Chemistry", Ebbing, 1997, Packaderm Press

JESSIE WATCHED AS ALL EVIDENCE OF HER EXISTENCE ANYWHERE IN THE MULTIVERSE RAPIDLY AND VIOLENTLY COMBINED WITH OXYGEN TO BECOME HEAT AND LIGHT AND WATER AND ASH.

AFTER A WHILE, SHE SAID SOMETHING THAT ALMOST EVERY HEARTH-TWO HEARTHLING WAS THINKING AT EXACTLY THE SAME TIME--

FEELS LIKE HOME.

BUT HERE'S THE THING ABOUT FIRE-- IT SPREADS.

THE FIRES WE SET SOMETIMES COME BACK ON US.

IT CAN ALL GO UP LIKE SO MUCH DRYER LINT.

ALL IT TAKES IS A STIFF WIND.

ON HEARTH-TWO THEY ALREADY **KNEW** THAT. THE OTHER THING THEY KNEW--

--WHEN THE FIRE RUNS OUT OF STUFF TO COMBINE WITH OXYGEN...

RUFF RUFF

...AND THE HEAT AND LIGHT'S ALL GONE INTO OUTER SPACE...

...AND ALL THAT'S LEFT IS **WET ASH** AND A LITTLE SMOKE...

...ALL YOU CAN DO IS COUNT YOURSELF **LUCKY.**

ON HEARTH-ONE...

EXCITED TO GET TO WORK!

WILLIE FUCHS MAYOR

I WANT A DIVORCE.

UNFORTUNATELY, YOUR INSURANCE POLICY DOESN'T *COVER* FIRE.

I DIDN'T THINK IT WOULD HAPPEN TO *US.*

I HEAR THAT A LOT.

Hey.

Hey.

DON'T TALK TO THOSE *VIOLENT CRIMINALS,* SON! THIS IS ALL THEIR FAULT!

IF THEY HADN'T VIOLATED THE LAWS OF SPACE AND TIME TO *COME* HERE, NONE OF THIS WOULD HAVE HAPPENED!

C'MON, DAD! THEY'RE US! WE'RE THE SAME!

NO, SON.

MEANWHILE ON HEARTH-TWO...

HARRY. I'M PREGNANT.

Hey.

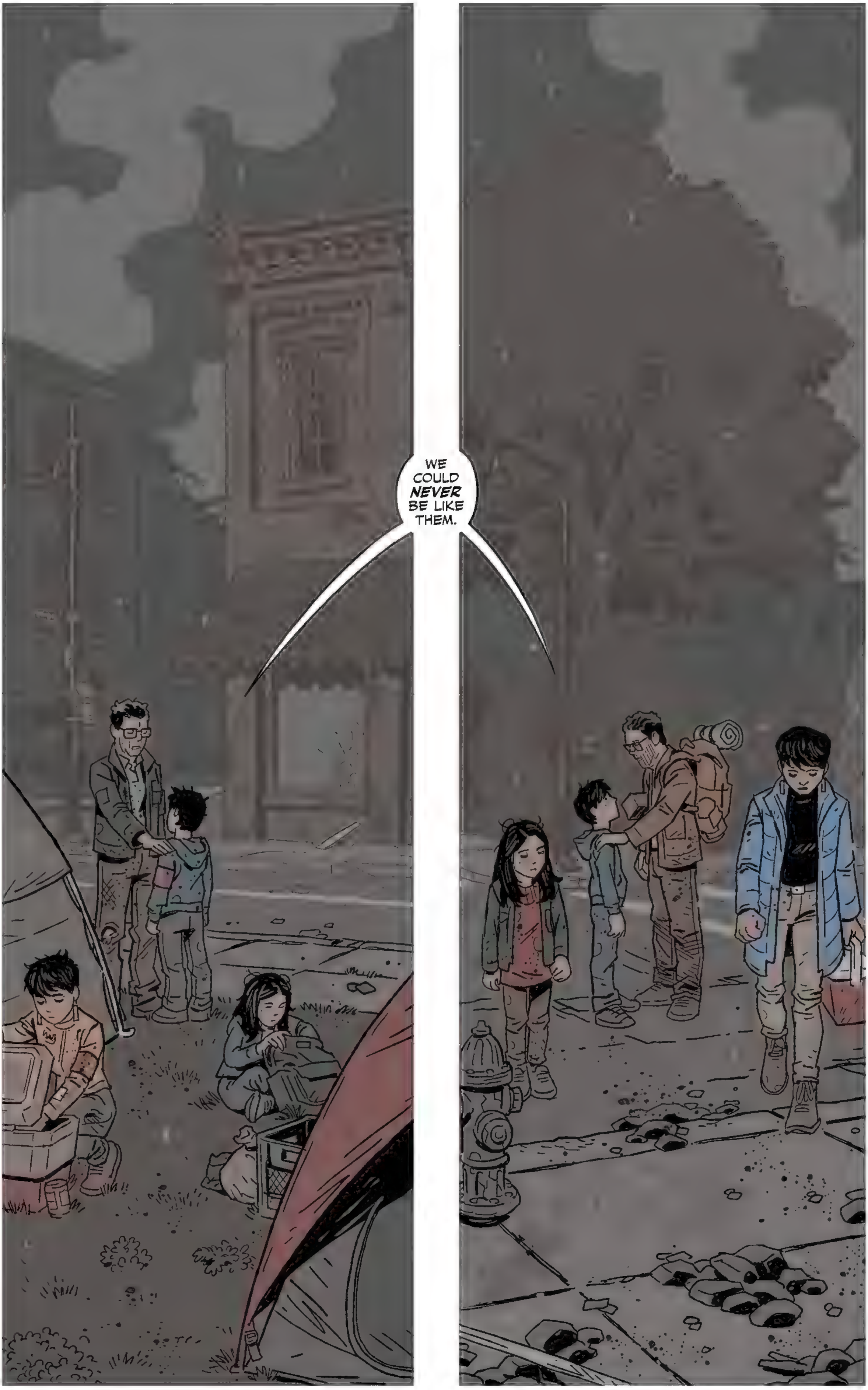
Hey.

DON'T TALK TO THOSE ***SOULLESS MONSTERS,*** SON! THIS IS ALL THEIR FAULT!

IF THEY'D SHOWN A LITTLE ***HUMANITY*** WHEN WE FIRST GOT HERE, NONE OF THIS WOULD HAVE HAPPENED!

C'MON, DAD! THEY'RE US! WE'RE THE SAME!

NO, SON.


WE COULD NEVER BE LIKE THEM.

SEX.

VIOLENCE.

BEES.

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NEXT MONTH

-ISSUE 4

RATED M (MATURE)

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TIME IS HAVING A CRISIS!

Mingling in the red light district you can find actual cavemen, medieval knights, and cyborg soldiers on leave from World War IV. Victorian debutantes amble their way into cell phone stores, confused and bewildered (what is a data plan?); On their way to work, bleary-eyed commuters get trapped in time-loops, assaulted by alternate reality versions of themselves, try to avoid post-apocalyptic wastelands. And LOOK: the 3:15 bus just took a wrong turn…into the neolithic era.

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COVER A

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Empire